CHAPTER 8

Social Thinking

Read This Chapter to Learn About

➤ Attribution Theory

➤ Prejudice, Bias, and Discrimination

➤ Stereotypes and Ethnocentrism

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Attribution theory examines how individuals explain their own behavior and the behavior of those around them. When a person attributes behavior based on individual abilities, traits, and characteristics, that behavior is said to be due to **internal attributions**. By contrast, when a person attributes behavior to external causes such as a particular situation or social environment, the behavior is said to be due to **external attributions**. However, people often have biases when explaining the behavior of themselves and others.

The **fundamental attribution error** describes the common human tendency to overattribute the behavior of others to stable internal causes (e.g., someone cuts you off in traffic, and your immediate thought is, "He is a jerk," rather than, "He didn't see me."). The social psychologist Bernard Weiner increased people's understanding of the attribution error by discovering that people ascribe internal and external attributions to behavior differently depending on whether they are judging themselves or others. When judging their own behavior, people are more likely to ascribe bad outcomes to external attributions (e.g., "I was cranky because I was tired after work today."). But they are more likely to ascribe good outcomes to internal attributions (e.g., "I did well on that presentation because I am a good public speaker."). This can also be called the **self-serving bias**. When judging the behavior of others, this pattern is reversed: people

are more likely to ascribe bad outcomes to internal attributions and good outcomes to external attributions (see Table 8-1).

TABLE 8-1 Attributions Based on Self and Others.

	Internal Attribution	**External Attribution**
Self	Good outcomes	Bad outcomes
Others	Bad outcomes	Good outcomes

Individuals' perceptions of themselves can alter how they perceive others. If they have the self-schema of a victim, they are more likely to perceive others as trying to take advantage of them. People who are extremely self-critical may flip the self-serving bias and ascribe bad outcomes for themselves to their own internal attributes and good outcomes for others to those others' internal attributes.

People's culture can affect the extent to which the self-serving bias affects their judgment about the actions of themselves and others. People from individualistic societies are more likely to use the self-serving bias and fall prey to the fundamental attribution error. People from more collectivist cultures are more likely to use a **self-effacing bias** that minimizes their own input to successful projects and overemphasizes their input to failures.

People's worldviews may also affect how they perceive those around them. A person with a just-world belief is more likely to provide defensive attributions to protect that worldview. For example, such a person may see another individual experiencing difficulties (e.g., homelessness, crime) and attribute those difficulties to the other person's internal characteristics.

PREJUDICE, BIAS, AND DISCRIMINATION

Unfortunately, attributions can expand to attribute behaviors and characteristics to entire groups of people rather than just an individual. When that occurs, prejudice, bias, and stereotypes emerge. **Prejudice** is the negative evaluation of a group of people. People with prejudices often support them with inaccurate beliefs that they consider to be "facts" that allow them to engage in negative stereotyping. Prejudice (a *cognitive* process) against a certain group often leads to the *behavior* of **discrimination** against members of that group.

Individual discrimination refers to the behavior of individuals and the actions that they take against some specific group due to the group members' gender, race, ethnicity, or some other characteristic. Institutional discrimination is different. The term **institutional discrimination** identifies rules, laws, and policies that are intentionally put in place to create a harmful effect upon a specific group. Institutional discrimination can both produce or be a product of individual discrimination.

Jane Elliot, a schoolteacher, famously performed a controversial "exercise" with grade school children in the late 1960s to demonstrate that prejudice is not inborn, but socially learned. She divided the children into those with brown eyes and those with blue eyes. For one day she made discriminatory comments about the two groups (e.g., praising blue-eyed children's correct responses and emphasizing mistakes made by brown-eyed children) and arranged classroom privileges (e.g., who was first in line to go out to recess) for the benefit of the blue-eyed children (institutional discrimination). Blue-eyed children were encouraged to interact only with other blue-eyed children. Soon blue-eyed children began to make derogatory remarks about brown-eyed children (individual discrimination), and the brown-eyed children appeared to internalize those negative remarks. During that single day, the blue-eyed children's academic scores and self-esteem improved, and they became arrogant and acted superior to their brown-eyed classmates. At the same time, the brown-eyed children's scores and self-esteem declined, and they became passive and subservient. On the following day, the teacher reversed the pattern and began treating the brown-eyed children as superior. Once the teacher—the authority figure—reversed her support, almost immediately the two groups of children swapped personality characteristics. This experiment showed how quickly prejudicial ideas—an increase in the power and unearned benefits of one group—will result in discrimination behaviors by children. Children quickly learn the prejudicial thought processes, take the unearned benefits as their entitlement, and begin to act in a discriminatory manner, especially when those thought processes have the support of an authority figure (e.g., a teacher, parents, or national figures).

Thus prejudice is quickly learned, and discriminatory actions can occur even more quickly when prejudice arises in the context of fear. Prejudice can develop along a number of different lines (power, prestige, class, gender), but it is more likely to develop when there is competition for some type of resource (a tangible resource or an intangible one such as prestige). A person who fears a loss of resources is more likely to engage in prejudicial thoughts and discriminatory actions. Further, when a person is fatigued, stressed, rushed, or not getting enough sleep (sleep debt or deficit), the brain is more likely to engage in cognitive processes that take less energy. The use of stereotyping and pigeonholing leading to prejudicial thinking requires a much lower cognitive load. A person whose brain is already overfatigued is more likely to use these forms of judgments about others rather than use complex thought processes.

Cognitive processes can also play a role in prejudice and discrimination. Some of these processes are conscious, but some may not be. The brain automatically classifies individuals into in-groups and out-groups. An **in-group** is the group that an individual feels that he or she belongs to, associates with, and identifies with. An **out-group** is made up of "others." Evolutionary psychologists believe that this process of identifying in/out groups increased group cohesiveness for small tribes of humans. Biologically, it is suspected that the hormone oxytocin is at least partially responsible for in-group cohesion. In-group members often use positive schemas and stereotypes

to describe their own group and negative stereotypes to describe out-group members. This can especially be seen in wartime. For example, U.S. military recruitment posters from World War I presenting Germans as "Huns" and similar posters from World War II presenting caricatures of Japanese soldiers are vivid illustrations of the negative stereotypes used to dehumanize wartime enemies.

Appearance can play a role in how an individual is perceived. Viewing a person's appearance is often the first step in **pigeonholing** that person into a specific social schema. **Social schemas** are categories that the brain uses to process interactions with others more efficiently. For example, if you see a person wearing tie-dyed clothing made of organic hemp fibers, you might quickly assume that the person is an environmental activist and possibly a vegan. In this way, your brain has quickly created a framework to engage with that other person. However, such speedy assumptions often occur at the expense of accuracy.

STEREOTYPES AND ETHNOCENTRISM

Stereotypes are a special subtype of schema. Whereas schemas are more personalized, stereotypes are widely held beliefs that an individual has certain characteristics because he or she belongs to a certain group. Stereotypes can be positive (e.g., "Asians are good at math.") or negative (e.g., "Women are overly emotional."). Stereotypes can affect academic performance and personality both positively and negatively. Research shows that individuals who are subjected to stereotyping often find that these are **self-fulfilling prophecies** that can predict life outcomes (e.g., a girl who is told that she will be bad at math because of her gender is much more likely to be a poor math student than a girl who is supported in her math goals). Unfortunately, stereotypes can be easily reinforced due to **illusory correlations** that occur when examples that reinforce a stereotype are more easily recalled than examples contrary to a stereotype (e.g., a local news story about a Latino man committing a crime is recalled, reinforcing a negative stereotype, while Latino men who are community leaders are forgotten).

Individuals who are subjected to stereotyping may also experience stereotype threat. A **stereotype threat** is the fear that an individual has of reinforcing a negative stereotype because of his or her own behaviors or characteristics. The fear may be conscious or unconscious. A famous series of studies by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson showed that African-American college students performed more poorly on tests than their white classmates when race and racial stereotypes were repeatedly emphasized throughout the testing protocol. In contrast, when race was not emphasized, African-American and white students had similar test scores. Thus students who perceived a stereotype threat in regard to themselves were less able to fully live up to their academic abilities.

One of the difficulties is the fundamental role played by **ethnocentrism**, or judging another culture based solely on the beliefs and values of one's own culture of origin. Anthropologists studying other cultures often have to be careful in their descriptions of these other cultures to ensure that they are not imposing judgments because of their own cultural of origin. Anthropologists use the tool of cultural relativism to attempt to maintain objectivity in describing other cultures. **Cultural relativism** attempts to overcome the assumption that ideas from the culture of origin (usually Western culture) are obvious and self-sustaining, and instead view each culture as a collection of unique beliefs, values, and behaviors that developed independently and should be studied independently from the biases of other cultures.